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**THE IMPACT OF ALLIED AIR INTERDICTION  
ON GERMAN STRATEGY FOR NORMANDY**  
**SABER MEASURES (BRAVO)**

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## FOREWORD

Over the past several years, serious doubts have arisen among various analysts regarding the value of interdiction attacks by US tactical air forces. Indeed, conclusions have been reached in some quarters that tactical air interdiction is hardly a worthwhile military objective. Attempts have been made to support these conclusions through "quantitative analyses" which have purported to demonstrate that interdiction campaigns do not yield significant returns in relation to the effort and resources invested in them.

This study is an investigation of the value of the interdiction campaign by Allied air forces during the invasion of Normandy in June 1944. However, the value of that interdiction campaign is not assessed through "quantitative analysis", but rather through the eyes of the German generals who endured it.

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## BACKGROUND

The plan for the Allied invasion of the European continent (OVERLORD) in June 1944 included an air offensive against transportation facilities supplying the German defenses. Two principal objectives of this offensive were: (a) to strain to the utmost the enemy's capacity for carrying out railway movement by the destruction of permanent installations, rolling stock, and repair facilities, and (b) to disorganize and, if possible, to stop military through-traffic. It was understood that unless this was done, the rate of the enemy's build-up in Normandy could easily exceed our own, and thus jeopardize any success which our initial landings might achieve.

Prior to the invasion, German generals themselves had differing estimates of Allied capabilities for air interdiction. The differences of opinion

arose primarily between Field Marshals von Rundstedt and Rommel regarding defensive strategy and the deployment of reserves in anticipation of the Allied invasion. Rommel advanced the concept that the German defensive forces must be deployed well forward, close to the coast, because it would be difficult if not impossible to commit them in time. He based his theory upon experience with the effectiveness of Allied air interdiction in North Africa and Italy. Rundstedt, and other German generals who had never experienced Allied air interdiction, did not agree with this. They maintained that Rommel's theory was a militarily unsound departure from proven concepts of defense in depth.

Rommel could never make them understand that defense in depth, though theoretically sound, would be strategically impossible against Allied air interdiction. As he saw it, the one chance of successfully defending the coast of Northern France in mid-1944

would be to concentrate sufficient force for a quick  
victory over an amphibious landing.

GERMAN GENERALS COMMENT ON NORMANDY

Field Marshal Rommel's Scenario for Normandy

As early as 31 December 1943 in a report to Hitler, Field Marshal Rommel outlined his scenario for the Allied invasion:

. . . The landing will probably be preceded by very heavy attacks from the air and be made under cover of a smoke-screen and of intense fire from numerous warships, with simultaneous heavy-bomber attacks. . . Our defence line, thin as it is at present, will suffer severely from the enemy bombing and artillery bombardment and it seems very doubtful whether, after this battering, it will be capable of beating off the enemy. . . With the coastline held as thinly as it is at present, enemy will probably succeed in creating bridgeheads at several different points and in achieving a major penetration of our coastal defences. Once this has happened it will only be by the rapid intervention of our operational reserves that he will be thrown back into the sea. This requires that these forces should be held very close behind the coast defences.

If, on the other hand, our principal reserves have to be brought up from well back inland, the move will not only require a great deal of time--time which the enemy will probably use to reinforce himself at his point of penetration and either organize his forces for defence or press the attack farther inland--but will also be under constant danger from the air. . . . British and American superiority in the air alone has again and again been so effective that all movement of major formations has been rendered completely impossible, both at the front and behind it, by day and by night, and our own air force has only on very rare occasions been able to make any appearance in support of our operations. . . .

. . . The Battle for the coast will probably be over in a few hours and, if experience is any judge, the rapid intervention of forces coming up from the rear will be decisive. One condition for the success of this counter-attack by the reserves will be for all available Luftwaffe tactical air forces to support the attack and, above all, fight off the enemy bomber formations.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Erwin Rommel (edited by B. H. Liddell Hart), The Rommel Papers, (New York, 1953) pp 453-456.

### General Speidel Outlines the von Rundstedt Strategy

At Berchtesgaden on 1 April 1944, before assuming his duties as Rommel's new chief of staff with the Army Group, General Hans Speidel had asked for instructions on strategy. In his post-war book he relates that:<sup>1</sup>

Hitler and the High Command declared that any such directive was "superfluous." The Commander in Chief in the West and Army Group B had strict orders that the coast was to be rigidly defended; there was to be no freedom for strategic operations. In case of local landing, the enemy was to be driven from the beaches back into the sea. . . .

The Commander in Chief for the West, Field Marshal von Rundstedt, thought along the strategic lines of the old school without taking into account the lessons of the Russian war and the Mediterranean campaigns, and without evaluating the battle tactics of the British and Americans. He proposed to hold a small reserve south and east of Paris, from where it would be brought up after an enemy landing. He thought that he could thus retain freedom of action and make full use of the former German superiority in open warfare. This strategy would

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1. Hans Speidel, Invasion 1944 (Chicago: Regnery, 1950) pp 48-55.

have been correct, had the German naval and air forces been equal, or nearly equal, in strength to those of the enemy. . . .

Rommel wanted to bring up the six Panzer divisions that were available and place them close to the area where invasion was expected. He remembered the lessons learned from the landings in Italy. Large-scale local landings could not be repulsed without these Panzer reserves. One or two Panzer divisions would be no better than a "fire brigade," considering the lack of transport facilities and the Allied air supremacy. . . .

As a minimum, five or six Panzer divisions within the Army Group command would be required for. . . various tasks, and even so it would be difficult for immobile coastal defence forces without air or naval support to operate against a fully motorized enemy with crushing sea and air superiority.

#### Rommel Fears Allied Air Interdiction

Six weeks before the invasion Field Marshal Rommel expressed his apprehension concerning the effects of Allied air interdiction on the mobility of German forces. In a letter of 23 April 1944, to Colonel General Jodl, on Hitler's OKW staff, he wrote:

My only real anxiety concerns the mobile forces. Contrary to what was decided at the conference on the 21st March, they have so far not been placed under my command. Some of them are dispersed over a large area well inland, which means that they will arrive too late to play any part in the battle for the coast. With the heavy enemy air superiority we can expect, any large-scale movement of motorised forces to the coast will be exposed to air attacks of tremendous weight and long duration. But without rapid assistance from the armored divisions and mobile units, our coast divisions will be hard put to it to counter attacks coming simultaneously from the sea and from airborne troops inland. Their land front is too thinly held for that. The dispositions of both combat and reserve forces should be such as to ensure that the minimum possible movement will be required to counter an attack at any of the most likely points, whether in the Low Countries, in the Channel area proper, in Normandy or in Brittany, and to ensure that the greater part of the enemy troops, sea and airborne, will be destroyed by our fire during their approach.

Contrary to myself, General Geyr von Schweppenburg,<sup>1</sup> who may well know the British in peacetime but has never yet met them in battle, sees the greatest danger in an operational airborne landing deep inside

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1. Commanding 1st SS Panzer Corps

France, and so wishes to be in a position to mount a quick counteroperation. His forces have been located mainly with that end in view. Furthermore, he does not wish to take his armoured divisions to an area behind the land front of the coastal defences. . . I have disagreed very violently with General von Geyr over this question and will only be able to execute my ideas if he is put under Army Group command early enough.<sup>1</sup>

Three weeks before the invasion, on 17 May 1944, Rommel repeated his apprehensions concerning air interdiction in a conversation with Lieutenant General Fritz Bayerlein, one of his division commanders.

Stated Rommel:

Our friends from the East (German generals with Russian Front experience) cannot imagine what they're in for here. It's not a matter of fanatical hordes to be driven forward in masses against our line, with no regard for casualties and little recourse to tactical craft; here we are facing an enemy who applies all his native intelligence to the use of his many technical resources, who spares no expenditure of material and whose every operation goes its course as though it had been the subject of

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1. Rommel Papers, pp 468-469.

repeated rehearsal. . . It's obvious that if the enemy once gets his foot in, he'll put every anti-tank gun and tank he can into the bridgehead and let us beat our heads against it, as he did at Medenine. To break through such a front you have to attack slowly and methodically, under cover of massed artillery, but we, of course, thanks to the Allied air forces, will have nothing there in time.<sup>1</sup>

#### Events Justify Rommel's Fears

Events proved that Field Marshal Rommel was correct in his analysis; fortunately for the Allies, his warnings went unheeded. Air interdiction made it impossible to bring the Panzer divisions from the interior of France to the coast. They were broken up in their detours before they could reach Normandy, and the piecemeal forces that did arrive could not immediately go into action without further reorganization. From the Field Marshal's report to Hitler on

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1. Ibid., pp 467-468.

10 June 1944, one can see the full impact of Allied air interdiction on German resistance to the D-Day invasion:

Under cover of his very strong air force, the enemy is visibly reinforcing himself on land, and neither our air force nor our navy is in a position, especially by day, to offer him any hindrance. Consequently, the enemy forces in the bridgehead are growing at a considerably faster rate than reserves are flowing to our front. Due to the enemy's air superiority, it proved impossible to bring 1st S.S. Panzer Corps, 7th Nebelwerfer Brigade, the A.A. Corps and the Corps "Meindl" up to the Orne and Vire fast enough to enable them to counterattack the enemy forces after the landing. The Nebelwerfer Brigade, A. A. Corps and Corps "Meindl" are still on the way forward. 1st S.S. Panzer Corps has been forced on the defensive in severe fighting. . .

Our operations in Normandy are tremendously hampered, and in some places even rendered impossible, by the following factors: (a) The immensely powerful, at times overwhelming, superiority of the enemy force. . . . During the day, practically our entire traffic --on roads, tracks and in open country-- is pinned down by powerful fighter-bomber and bomber formations, with the result that the movement of our troops on the battlefield is almost

completely paralysed, while the enemy can manoeuvre freely. Every traffic defile in the rear areas is under continual attack and it is very difficult to get essential supplies of ammunition and petrol up to the troops.

Even the movement of minor formations on the battlefield--artillery going into position, tanks forming up, etc.--is instantly attacked from the air with devastating effect. During the day, fighting troops and headquarters alike are forced to seek cover in wooded and close country in order to escape the continual pounding from the air. On the 9th June, the situation in battle area behind the S.S. Corps, was that large numbers of enemy fighter-bomber squadrons circled the battlefield continuously, while powerful bomber formations dropped a very heavy weight of bombs on troops, villages, bridges, and crossroads, with complete disregard for the civilian population. Neither our anti-aircraft nor the Luftwaffe seems capable of imposing any check on the paralysing and destructive effect of the enemy air force (27,000 sorties in one day).<sup>1</sup> The troops--Army and Waffen S.S.--are putting up as good a defence as they can with the means available to them, but ammunition is short and can only be replaced under the most difficult conditions. . .<sup>2</sup>

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1. Actually less than 11,000.
2. Liddell Hart, The German Generals Talk (New York: Morrow, 1948), pp 243-244.

In commenting on the reduction of mobility caused by air interdiction on 6 June 1944, General Gunther Blumentritt, Chief of Staff under Field Marshals von Rundstedt, von Kluge, and Model, in a post-war interview described the situation to Liddell Hart:

The Corps artillery had been kept on the east bank of the Seine--and the Allied Air Forces had destroyed the bridges. The Field Marshal and I had seen some of them being smashed. The artillery thus had to make a long circuit southward by way of Paris before they could get across the Seine, and was repeatedly bombed on the march, which caused more delays. As a result two days passed before this reserve was on the scene, ready to strike.<sup>1</sup>

Von Rundstedt Strategy Caused Costly Mistakes

By the time that Rundstedt realized his mistake in underestimating the power of Allied air interdiction, it was too late. After the war he stated to Basil Liddell Hart that after the first few days

1. Ibid., p 243.

following the invasion he had no hope of victory over the invaders:

The Allied Air Force paralyzed all movement by day, and made it very difficult even at night. They had smashed the bridges over the Loire as well as over the Seine, shutting off the whole area. These factors greatly delayed the concentration of reserves there--they took three or four times longer to reach the front than we had reckoned.<sup>1</sup>

Field Marshal Guenther von Kluge (another general who had at first rejected Rommel's ideas) reported in mid-July:

The enemy's command of the air restricts all movement in terms of both space and time, and renders calculation of time impossible. For armoured or motorised troops in divisional strength upwards, it limits the possibilities of command and manoeuvre to night or bad weather operations, which cannot as a rule develop into anything more than operations with limited objective.<sup>2</sup>

Several weeks after D-Day, Rommel dispatched a memorandum, on 5 July 1944, to Field Marshal Guenther von Kluge, the C-in-C (West). Pointing out how the

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1. Ibid., pp 243-244.
2. Rommel Papers, p 485.

recommendations on deployment and command relations had been disregarded, Rommel further depicts vividly the frustrations caused by Allied air interdiction:

... Despite the existence of the railway network and sea routes, supply conditions, especially in Normandy, were already becoming difficult even before the invasion, due to the heavy bombing of railway installations. . .

The advance elements of 12th S.S. Panzer Division Hitler Jugend, did not arrive in the area north-west of Caen until 09.30 hours on the 7th June, after a 75-mile approach march, during which they sustained substantial losses from low-flying aircraft. There being then neither the time nor the space for a formation operation, its attack could not be driven home.

Panzer Lehr Division had 110 miles to cover, and its leading elements did not arrive at the battle front west of Caen until 13.00 hours on the 7th June. They, too, were hindered in their advance by low-flying aircraft, and the wheeled units became separated from the tracked. As a result, their attack could no longer be put in; they were, in fact, hard put to it to maintain their position against the enemy, who had by that time grown strong. . .

The leading elements of 2nd Panzer Division, which had to be brought up from its station on either side of the Somme

(160 miles as the crow flies), arrived on the 13th June. A further seven days were needed before it could go into action as a division.

3rd Parachute Division required six days for its approach march from Brittany to its battle area northeast of St. Lo (135 miles as the crow flies), during which time it was under constant threat from the air. By the time it arrived, the attack it was due to launch on Bayeux was no longer possible. . .

77th Division required six days before it could intervene with substantial forces in the fighting in the north of the Cotentin peninsula.

All the reserves that came up arrived far too late to smash the enemy landing by counter-attacks. By the time they arrived the enemy had disembarked considerably stronger forces and himself gone over to the attack under cover of powerful air and artillery support.

Support by our air force was not forthcoming on the scale originally foreseen. The enemy had command of the air over the battlefield up to a point some 60 miles behind the front. In sorties of immense strength he smashed the defence installations in the coastal zones and effectively opposed the approach march of our reserves and the supply of our troops, principally by damage to the railway system.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Ibid., pp 481-484.

#### REMARKS

While it may be possible to quantify the Allied air interdiction efforts by listing number of sorties, bomb tonnage expended, and the like, it is difficult to see how an analyst could quantitatively predict the outcome or assign numbers to the effects described by the German generals in this study. From their own experience these top strategists who defended the Normandy beachhead in World War II were able to clearly reveal what a major role air interdiction played in the failure of their strategy.

The initial success of OVERLORD, specifically during the first few days, was due to the Allied air interdiction effort. The fact that the Allied ground forces could land, consolidate their positions, and then go on the offensive before the German reinforcements could reach the battle area, is highly indicative

of the effectiveness of the Allied interdiction campaign.

It is extremely doubtful that quantitative analysis could measure the disruption caused by air interdiction which led to the failure of the German Army to contain the Normandy invasion.